**THE WIDOW OF NAIN AND THE MISSION OF THE TWELVE**

**Luke 7:11-16 and Matt 9: 36-10.8**

Today’s two Gospel readings deal firstly with a widow who has lost all the men in her life, her husband and her only son. Jesus meets her as she leaves the city for the place of burial of her son with a large crowd in attendance. She is overcome with grief but He approaches the funeral bier on which he is being carried, tells the mother not to weep, touches the bier and restores the dead man to life with the words, “Young man, I say to you, arise”. The second passage from St Matthew deals with the commissioning of the twelve for their forthcoming work of preaching the good news of the dawning of the Kingdom of Heaven, healing those afflicted with illnesses of mind and body and raising the dead as they have witnessed in Christ’s example at the City of Nain and during his recent ministry.

In both incidents we witness the absolute humanity of Christ in his deep sympathy or rather empathy for those who are suffering. In the first case we read that “when he saw the woman he had compassion on her and told her not to weep”. In the second reading we are told, “When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”. This image of a shepherd with his sheep occurs frequently in the gospels especially that of St John such as the parable of the lost sheep and the Lord’s image of himself as the door to the sheepfold and is a vivid reminder of how we as his Church relate to each other humanly and especially to our Lord and Saviour, who guides us.

The cry of Christ is prompted by his ministry among his people, Israel, and forcibly those outside, the Gentiles, who do not wish to be excluded from the Kingdom which is being revealed. The previous verse to this passage speaks about Jesus going about all the cities and villages in his ministry teaching in their synagogues (and outside of course) preaching the gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease and infirmity. Then he turns to his disciples and utters the famous statement, “The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few” i.e. there is a chronic need for more labourers like himself and his disciples to help with the mission of bringing the good news of the kingdom to those around them. And for this work it is not a question of recruiting as in the secular world but of praying to God to provide more labourers to bring in the harvest.

After this, Christ summons his disciples and gives them authority over unclean spirits for their mission to cast them out and to heal the sick. They are specifically sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and told not to go to the Samaritans with whom there is a long-standing issue dating from the separation of the northern kingdom centuries before over which is the holy city, Jerusalem or Gerizim. Nor does he send them to the Gentiles, who are ritually unclean for Jews. We know from their elation on their return described in the Gospels that their mission was an unqualified success as they eagerly recount to the Lord the healings and casting out of demons which they have performed in his name. But Christ brings them down to earth by telling them not to dwell on the miracles they have performed but rather to rejoice in the fact that their names are written in heaven.

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In the last few weeks one of the underlying themes in the gospels read at the Divine Liturgy has been that in some sense we are all as followers of Christ embarked on an apostolic mission to the world not just the hierarchs of the Church. This can be a conscious or unconscious work depending on where God guides us in our lives, whether to serve Christ’s Church in a formal capacity or as a faithful servant in secular life. I mentioned the notion created by St Paul of the Church being the ‘fragrance or aroma of Christ’ in the world “to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life’. Whichever path God allots to us that mission of the disciples is laid upon us as a duty. Christ makes this very clear in the final verse from today’s second gospel reading with the words, “You received without pay, give without pay”. In another place he upbraids the sons of Zebedee and their mother for wanting her boys James and John to be the heads of the group around Christ and to have the commanding roles in the next life. The work of serving Christ must start with an understanding and appreciation of what God has done for us in Christ. The phrase from the prayer of St Philaret of Moscow comes to mind, “You love me more than I myself know how to love”. We must dwell on what we have received from our Master and not be distracted by any suffering we have experienced.

We have an insight into the depths of this love from the first gospel reading today. Christ is overwhelmed with pity for this woman who has lost everything. He approaches the procession, stops the bier and restores the dead son to life. In the second reading we are introduced to the lost of this world and we see this so strikingly every day in our society around us. A society which is plagued by all sorts of often self-inflicted wounds and one which so desperately needs the news of the Kingdom of Heaven to experience the unfathomable riches of God’s love.

So as we are instructed by our Lord himself let us pray that He will send out labourers into the harvest and to show each of us how we can return to God in a smaller measure what He has given us.

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